

Message Text

PAGE 01 STATE 154878

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FROM WASHINGTON
TO AIG 6006, 6007
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NATO CONFIDENTIAL FROM WASHINGTON

POLITICAL ANALYSIS: THE USSR AND THE SUEZ CANAL

1. THE SOVIETS, WHO HAVE NEVER SPENT ANY OF THEIR OWN POLITICAL CAPITAL TO GET THE SUEZ CANAL REOPENED, RESPONDED COOLLY TO THE OPENING OF THE WATERWAY EARLIER THIS MONTH. MOSCOW VIEWS SADAT'S MOVE AS SYMPTOMATIC OF HIS INCLINATION TO DEAL WITH THE WEST, PARTICULARLY WITH THE US, AND TO SEEK ADDITIONAL PARTIAL AGREEMENTS WITH ISRAEL. MOREOVER, THE USSR REALIZES THAT:

(A)--THE CANAL WILL NO LONGER BE A DIVISIVE ISSUE BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE WESTERN TRADING NATIONS.

(B)--ITS REOPENING WILL REDUCE SOVIET ABILITY TO EXPLOIT CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 STATE 154878

THAT ISSUE AS THEY HAVE IN THE PAST.

(C)--YET, THE ARABS WILL CONTINUE TO PRESSURE MOSCOW TO BRING ABOUT FURTHER ISRAELI WITHDRAWALS.

2. IN THE PAST, WHEN THE CANAL WAS OPEN, IT DID NOT PROVE TO BE CRUCIAL TO SOVIET ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC INTERESTS:

(A)--LESS THAN 5 PERCENT OF SOVIET TRADE PASSED THROUGH THE CANAL IN 1967.

(B)--THE SOVIET NAVAL PRESENCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN DEVELOPED AFTER THE CLOSURE OF THE CANAL AND HAS BEEN DRAWN PRIMARILY FROM THE PACIFIC FLEET.

3. AT THE SAME TIME, THE REOPENING OF THE CANAL DOES REDUCE THE COSTS AND DIFFICULTIES OF CARRYING OUT ONGOING OPERATIONS:

(A)--THE SOVIET NAVAL PRESENCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN WILL BENEFIT FROM THE FACT THAT THE DISTANCE FROM THE ARABIAN PENINSULA TO SOVIET NAVAL BASES IS CUT IN HALF.

(B)--SOVIET AID PROGRAMS IN SUCH STATES ON THE INDIAN OCEAN LITTORAL AS SOMALIA AND INDIA WILL BENEFIT THANKS TO THE EASIER DIRECT ACCESS NOW POSSIBLE.

(C)--MOSCOW WILL BE IN A BETTER POSITION TO RESPOND TO CRISIS SITUATIONS EAST AND SOUTH OF THE CANAL.

(D)--THE DISTANCE FROM SOVIET PACIFIC PORTS TO THOSE IN THE BALTIK AND BLACK SEAS WILL BE SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCED, WITH A COMMENSURATE INCREASE IN AVAILABLE MARITIME CAPACITY.

4. NEVERTHELESS, SOVIET MILITARY AND COMMERCIAL PASSAGE WILL BE HOSTAGE TO THE ARAB-ISRAELI SITUATION AND THE UNCERTAINTIES OF THE SOVIET-EGYPTIAN RELATIONSHIP. CAIRO PRESUMABLY WILL TRY TO EXPLOIT ANY SOVIET DEPENDENCE ON SUEZ.

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 STATE 154878

5. WHEN THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF LAST YEAR'S EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT PROVIDED FOR THE EVENTUAL REOPENING OF THE CANAL, MOSCOW'S REACTION WAS LARGELY DEFENSIVE. SOVIET COMMENTARIES DENIED THAT IT WOULD OFFER ANY SIGNIFICANT NAVAL ADVANTAGES TO THE USSR AND COUNTERED CHINESE ALLEGATIONS THAT THE SOVIET-AMERICAN NAVAL RIVALRY WOULD LEAD TO GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY AGAINST THE MAJOR

ARAB OIL PRODUCERS. MOSCOW TRIED TO CREATE THE IMPRESSION THAT ITS INDIAN OCEAN SQUADRON WOULD REMAIN ABOUT THE SAME WHETHER THE CANAL WERE OPEN OR CLOSED.

6. IN THE WAKE OF THE ACTUAL REOPENING, THE SOVIETS

SURFACED THEIR SUSPICION THAT SADAT'S MANEUVER, WHICH WAS PRECEDED BY ISRAEL'S REDUCTION OF FORCES ON THE CANAL'S EAST BANK, WOULD LEAD TO A RETURN OF THE STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS OF "PARTIAL AGREEMENTS."

(A)--IN AN ARABIC-LANGUAGE BROADCAST ON JUNE 5, MOSCOW STATED THAT THE REOPENING OF THE CANAL WAS NOT UNIFORMLY REGARDED IN THE ARAB WORLD AS THE CORRECT DECISION AND NOTED THAT "SOME ARAB PAPERS" HAD SUGGESTED THAT THE CANAL SHOULD REMAIN CLOSED AS A MEANS OF INFLUENCING VARIOUS COUNTRIES IN WESTERN EUROPE TO PRESSURE ISRAEL.

(B)--THE BROADCAST CHALLENGED THE VIEW IN "SOME EGYPTIAN QUARTERS" THAT SADAT'S ACTION WOULD BE "MET BY A CERTAIN STEP BY ISRAEL."

(C)--ON THE FOLLOWING DAY, MOSCOW RADIO NOTED THAT THE "ISRAELI AGGRESSORS AND THEIR PROTECTORS" WERE ALREADY MAKING "TENDENTIOUS ATTEMPTS TO EXPLOIT THE REOPENING OF THE SUEZ."

7. THE SOVIET COMMENTARY LINKED THE EVENT TO AN INCREASE IN EGYPTIAN CRITICISM OF SOVIET POLICIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST. IT REMINDED ARAB AUDIENCES OF SOVIET ASSISTANCE DURING THE 1967 AND 1973 WARS. IN A PARTICULARLY SNIDE OBSERVATION, THE SOVIETS ALSO INFORMED CAIRO THAT INCOME FROM THE SUEZ SHOULD PROVIDE EGYPT WITH THE FUNDS TO

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 STATE 154878

REPAY ITS FOREIGN DEBTS AND MAKE IT UNNECESSARY TO REQUEST POSTPONEMENT.

8. THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT THE REOPENED CANAL WILL BE A MAJOR CONVENIENCE TO THE USSR, PARTICULARLY IN TERMS OF ITS PRESENCE IN THE PERSIAN GULF AND THE INDIAN OCEAN. NEVERTHELESS, THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE REOPENING DO NOT AUGUR WELL FOR SOVIET EFFORTS TO MOVE SADAT AWAY FROM ADDITIONAL STEP-BY-STEP DIPLOMACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST OR FROM INCREASED DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITY IN THE WEST. THE SOVIETS MUST ACT, MOREOVER, WITH A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF

PRUDENCE; THEY MUST RECKON THAT A NAVAL BUILDUP IN THE INDIAN OCEAN AS A RESULT OF THE REOPENING OF THE CANAL COULD WELL CONFRONT THEM WITH AN INCREASED WESTERN PRESENCE IN THE AREA. INGERSOLL

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